

Aesthetics

Our lives are full of aesthetic experiences. From the taste of coffee in the morning till a last glimpse at the stars before falling asleep, we constantly evaluate what we perceive with our senses. That is the original meaning of *aesthetics*: the science of what is sensed and imagined, as defined by the 18th century philosopher Alexander Baumgarten. Dictionaries today give a more constrained definition of aesthetic, e.g. “giving or designed to give pleasure through beauty” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Many of the great philosophers like Aristotle and Kant wrote about aesthetics. And psychologists were already investigating beauty when psychology became a field. In 1876, Gustav Fechner wrote a book arguing that one can study beauty like any other of our perceptions. Yet, in the following years, as psychology struggled to prove its place among the ‘objective’ sciences, its societies voted for behaviorism which banished study of phenomena that were not directly observable, halting research on aesthetics. Since the late 90s, empirical aesthetics has seen a grand revival.

The modern science of aesthetics, called *empirical aesthetics* or *neuroaesthetics*, lives in the middle-ground between those two definitions. Empirical aesthetics studies how people make aesthetic judgments, often beauty, but also liking, preference, interest, and many more. Frequently, these judgments are made about art.

One branch of this new aesthetics research has shed light on what makes things, on average, more beautiful. Three properties have found consistent support. Most people prefer round to angular objects, and symmetric over asymmetric, and in most cultures, prefer blue and green hues.

However, these average rules do not apply to every object or every person. In the best case for common taste, individual taste is just as important as average appeal when it comes to the attractiveness of faces. At the opposite extreme, individual differences make up 90% of people’s preferences when it comes to abstract art. How, then, should we understand aesthetic experience?

A second branch of empirical aesthetics capitalizes on these individual differences and asks: What are the general processes that lead people to call something beautiful despite the enormous differences in what they call beautiful? These researchers find that, across objects and perceivers, beauty is tightly linked to pleasure. When one is high, so is the other. And if an object cannot elicit pleasure or if a person cannot experience pleasure, there is no beauty. Brain-imaging studies draw a similar picture. When people experience beauty, we observe activity in the same network that is also associated with experiencing other pleasures like food and money.

So, is beauty any different from other pleasures at all? Yes, research indicates that beauty corresponds to intense pleasure. Only pleasure exceeding a critical threshold is beauty. And such intense beauty-pleasure activates another network in the brain that is otherwise linked to self-reflexion. Beauty is an intense pleasure experience.

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